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AUTHOR Ganzi, Peng; Xianguang, Liu
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ABSTRACT

The 1980s saw significant development in China's rural vocational education and the continuation of some problems. Most Chinese secondary (92 percent) and postsecondary (82 percent) students are educated in the countryside. However, only 60 percent of vocational high school students are educated there. There is insufficient enrollment at many rural vocational high schools and a high student dropout rate. Another problem is that most rural vocational schools have copied conventional senior middle schools or urban vocational schools. Poor teaching and inadequate financial support have contributed to the rural vocational schools' low status within society. However, rural education is enjoying increased financial support from the government. In order to stabilize China's agriculture and increase rural prosperity, it is imperative to educate and encourage rural youth to stay in agriculture and master the techniques necessary for continuing agricultural development. The traditional concept of education in China with a single system of learning and a weak foundation in vocational education has resulted in slow development in vocational education. All 7,600 vocational high schools were established in the 1980s. A comprehensive rural vocational education system--a flexible system that encompasses different structures relevant to the local economy and social development--is necessary to promote continuing agricultural prosperity for peasants and agricultural modernization. (CML)

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PROSPECTS FOR CHINA'S RURAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF HIGHER AGRICULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Peng Ganzi
Vice president of Hunan Agricultural College

Liu Xianguang
Lecturer of Hunan Agricultural College

ABSTRACT

The 1980s saw significant development in China's rural vocational education and also brought to light some difficulties. However limiting factors conditioning such development can also act as stimuli. At the turn of the century, rural vocational education promises to become the most important component of the whole educational system in China, changing the whole outlook of China's rural education. The involvement of China's higher agricultural institutions presents an historic opportunity which should not be missed.

I. Background to China's Rural Vocational Education

The development of China's education system in the 1980's was marked by a significant breakthrough in the role of vocational education, something which holds great promise in the coming 10 years. However, future potential can only be realised with significant developments in rural vocational education, not only because of the important position rural education holds in china, but also because of the fact that at present, it is the weak link in the whole vocational system.

i) The vast majority of chinese primary and secondary school students are educated in the countryside (92% and 82% respectively). However, the corresponding figure for vocational high school students is only 60%. Taking the total number of students of senior middle school age, 42.7% are vocational technical school students, and in 1988, less than 40% were from the countryside. Of the 7600 vocational high schools (with 2.36 million

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students) operating in the country in 1989, 5100 schools (with 1.44 million students) were in the countryside, accounting for 67% of the school total and 61% of the student total.

ii) At the present time, there is insufficient enrolment at many rural vocational high schools and a high rate of student drop-out after enrolment. Some schools in Jian county, Jiangxi Province, were unable to fill even half of their enrolment quota, and the drop-out rate was as high as 27.61%. There is also evidence to suggest that this situation is getting worse. In Han Dan Prefecture, Hebei Province for instance, 2200 students enroled at the 17 rural vocational high schools in 1985, but this figure had fallen to 1000 by 1987.

A sample survey of 700 middle school students by East China Normal University shed some light on the problem. Results showed that none of them were interested in taking up farming work after leaving. Another survey of 10 000 peasant households showed that nearly 70% of the peasants questioned would like their children to become students at non-agriculturally related colleges universities.

iii) Most rural vocational schools have established themselves along lines previously set by conventional senior middle schools, or copied the existing syllabus of urban vocational schools. In addition, poor teaching quality and inadequate financial support have contributed towards their low status within society.

Following significant development during the 1980s, we shall now turn our attention to the limiting and stimulating factors which determine future progress in rural vocational education.

i) A large population, limited natural resources, inadequate financial input and increased daily demand-factors restricting the development of rural vocational education— can perhaps act the spur for its development.

With little more than 1% of the world's total educational input, China is managing to support 23% of the world's total number of students. This situation has seriously restricted the development of education, and rural vocational education in particular. In an attempt to improve the situation,

rural education is enjoying increased support. In Hunan Province for example, the education budget in 1989 was ¥2250 million, an increase of ¥520 million over that of 1988. Nevertheless, per capita fund allocation was still as low as ¥37.5 in a province with a population of 60 million. Income from non-governmental sources, mainly that collected from peasants for the compulsory 9 year rural and rural vocational education, accounted for 43% (¥960 million) of the total, and in spite of the ¥10 million yearly funding for the 118 rural vocational high schools, fund allocation for individual schools still averaged less than ¥100000.

In order to statisfy the increasing demand for food with limited arable resources and to ensure further increases in agricultural production under strict financial constraints, it is clear that the only viable way forward for China's agriculture is reliance on the development of educational science and technology, with improvements in educational and technical standards for the broad masses of peasants, younger peasants in particular. The developement of rural vocational education is therefore of vital importance, and represents an historic mission which must be fulfilled.

ii) Following both government and public recognition of the importance of rural vocational education, its role in general education has been increased significantly. However, development has been restricted by the slow and difficult shift in emphasis to rural industry and service enterprises resulting from growth in the rural labour force.

Over the past 10 years, the 20 million or so rural enterprises have undoubtedly made a substantial contribution to the national economy. In 1989, their total output value of ¥840 billion accounted for 25% of national output, 33% of the combined output of industry and agriculture, and 20% of China's total exports. In addition, their successful absortion of 100 million surplus agricultural labourers has helped pave way for the further transfer of labourers to non-agricultural enterprises. However, there are still 300 million farming labourers in the country, and this figure is increasing as the transfer rate decreases and the rural labour force

increases.

• Betweeen 1978 and 1987, the development of rural enterprises reached its peak, with the absorbtion of 70 million rural labourers. However, during the same period there was a net increase of 84 million rural labourers, resulting in an absorbtion rate of 84%. The limited transfer of rural labourers has itself placed limit on the development of rural education, and resulted in the increased proportion of agriculture related subjects offered in the syllabus.

In order to stablize China's agriculture and increase rural prosperity, it is imperative to educate and encourage rural youth to stay in agriculture and master the techniques necessary for continuing agricultural development. To fulfil this task, the structure of rural vocational education should match the actual structure of agricultural production.

iii) The traditional concept of education in China with a single system of learning and a weak foundation in vocationat education, has resulted in slow development in this field. This situation in itself provides a stimulus for the further development of vocational education.

All 7600 vocational high schools were established during the 1980s. Prior to this, secondary high education in China consisted solely of the senior middle school system. This caused extremely stiff competition for places at colleges and universities, to such an extent that only 3% of candidates secured places. For the poorest agricultural areas, this has meant a drain in top students to the economically more developed areas, and a further widening of the gap between developed and under developed regions. For example, statistics show that in 1978 the ratio of per capita income between Shanghai and Gansu was 2.95 to 1. By 1988, this had win dened from 3. 83 to 1. There is also a causative relationship between the long term single educational structure and prejudice against vocational education, with the result that every year 15 million youngsters enter the labour force without any form of vocational training, and they lack specialised skills after 6 years, 9 years or 12 years in the single

educational system.

The gulf between what can be provided in the single educational structure and the actual needs of the rural economy and the conditions necessary for social development has not only affected economic development in general, but also affected the development of education itself, reform of education system is a pre-condition if this gulf is to be bridged. To date, rural vocational education has helped bridge this gulf, and holds great promise for the future.

II. Prospects For China's Rural Vocational Education

The major challenge confronting educationists in China is the establishment of a comprehensive rural vocational education system, based on an assessment of actual conditions and future needs in the next century in order to promote continuing agricultural prosperity for peasants and agricultural modernization.

i) Such a system should encompass different structures relevant to the local economy and social development. In order to fulfil this task, the compulsory 9-year education system should be taken as the launching pad for the further development of vocational education so as to improve the quality of would-be labourers, with the training of lower and intermediate level personnel as a priority.

In terms of economic and educational development, there are large differences between different areas in China and a flexible education system should be able to satisfy different needs in different areas of the country. The major task for most areas in the near future should be the development of rural vocational education at its primary level by means of the 3+1 formulae—3 years junior middle school followed by 1 year vocational training. At the same time, 1 or 2 demonstration rural vocational schools shoud be set up in each county. The 3+1 formulae would be an intermediate step in the establishment of more substantial vocational high schools.

Generally speaking, the junior middle school leavers are below the minimum age for farming work, and because of old prejudices and traditional ideas, most of them would like to go on to further study. However, by the end of the century, the number of junior middle school leavers proceeding to senior middle schools will be confined to a figure of 2.5 million, leaving over 6 million students who cannot go. If a sufficient number of vocational high schools cannot be provided, this number of students cannot possibly go on to further study. Out of these 6 million students, 5 million will stay in the countryside.

At present, the annual national enrolment of rural vocational high school students is less than 0.5 million when the proportion of enrolment between vocational technical schools and ordinary middle schools reaches 6,4 at the turn of the century, the enrolment of rural vocational high schools will have to be quadrupled. As consequence, the existing 3 year schooling period agricultural education will haye to be more vocationally orientated in terms of the type of syllabus offered. Enrolment is expected to increase further as need for personnel in villages and townships increases daily. As a result, demand for further study of vocational high school graduates could be satisfied, and in such a way, a new rural vocational education system comprising different structures could gradually take form.

ii) Such a system should offer a workable structure which serves the needs of production, management and employment structures in different areas of China. By the turn of the century, agriculture will continue to be the main subject offered at rural vocational schools. At present, the proportion of students studying agriculture in such schools is only 40%. Rapid economic development especially the development of rural enterprises will see the gradual transformation of existing vocational high schools into new agricultural and industrially related institutions with subjects ranging from food processing to agricultural engineering, architecture and mechanical engineering.

The purpose of agricultural subjects in vocational high schools is to train a new generation of farmers, since there are 150 million farm households in China at present. As the economic situation of the peasants is initially improved, they will see the importance of science and technology for the younger generation, and a substantial increase in demand for education is entirely predictable. To prepare a new generation for such a household based rural economy, the subjects and courses offered need to be rural economy orientated.

China's countryside is characterized by a large population and limited land and resources, yet there is an increasing demand for agricultural products. To satisfy this demand, management structures must be reformed so as to increase the output and utilization of resources. Furthermore, rural economic diversification is needed to help cushion the effects of seasonality and variable environmental conditions. The schooling system and curriculum design should respond to these needs by offering a wider variety of related subjects which are more relevant to the new development in learner needs.

Subject arrangement in such schools could be divided into two categories— single subject specialization and varied subject study. The first could include non-agricultural subject specializations, geared towards rural and service industries. The second could include general agriculture and rural household management, and this would become the most important of the two.

iii) An effective system of vocational training and technical extension should be established throughout the country. The focus at such a network at county level should be the vocational high school, from which links can be forged to township peasant schools and village part-time schools. As such a system is established and perfected, the example set should encourage greater openness and flexibility in other educational institutions. This situation would present greater farm training opportunities for 100 million rural middle school leavers and in-service training for another 100 million

rural industrial staff. Such a system would allow better arrangement and coordination of agriculture, science and education.

iv) All round involvement in rural development could without doubt establish the school as the focus for comprehensive rural development. In addition to the training of a large number of new farmers, rural vocational schools could be closely associated with agricultural, scientific departments concerned, to carry out scientific experiments, technical training and information services. In such a way a new mechanism for the combined development of education and economy could be set up. With the improved position of such schools and teacher's wage increases, better qualified teachers could be attracted.

III. The Role of China's Higher Agricultural Institutions

Structural reform in rural secondary education has gradually promoted the establishment of a more effective agricultural educational system, providing higher agricultural institutions with a good opportunity for further development.

Higher agricultural institutions are faced with the dual task of extension and improvement. Extension should involve the training of large number of qualified agricultural, technical management personnel, together with teachers who can transfer their knowledge, skills to peasants and the younger generation. However, the different types of institution should play different roles, colleges should be mainly responsible for the training of teachers and technicians whereas schools (including vocational high schools) should be involved in the training of peasants and farm workers. The use of agricultural colleges in the training of teachers for vocational high schools is a logic step in the realization of their full potential, especially as enrolment quotas cannot be fulfilled at present. At the turn of the century, we can expect an improvement in rural vocational technical teacher training in higher agricultural institution.

In addition to the training of vocational high school teachers, agricultural colleges/universities can also be expected to provide technical consultation services in the vocational education network. As the rural vocational technical education system is further improved, a new kind of agricultural technical transfer system would come into being, provincial agricultural college/university→prefectural agricultural secondary school→county vocational high school→township/village elementary rural vocational school. Such a system would pave the way for the integration of agricultural education, scientific research and extension and further narrow the gap between agricultural schools, rural construction and peasants.

In conclusion, a provincial agricultural college/university can not only provide a service to rural vocational high schools in terms of teacher training and current techniques but also in teaching resources, laboratory facilities, field work design, vocational education research and other consultation services. Higher agricultural institutions can therefore act as centres for agricultural education in the true sense of the word.